

# Antigones

Gladstone Prize  
Essay 2001

## Lucy Underwood

The first prize was won by Lucy Underwood, a student at Hills Road Sixth-Form College in Cambridge. The second prize went to Sarah Appleton of West Kirby Grammar School for Girls for her essay discussing the relationship between Virgil's *Aeneid* and Purcell's opera *Dido and Aeneas*. This is an extract from Lucy Underwood's essay comparing Sophocles' *Antigone* with that of Jean Anouilh:

Sophocles wrote *Antigone* in c.441 B.C., the first of his Theban Plays to be written, although the last chronologically. More than 2,000 years later, in Nazi-occupied France, Jean Anouilh produced his own version of the great myth. One might legitimately wonder why this story, which is centred round the ancient Greek tradition that souls could not rest unless their bodies were buried properly, could be relevant to France in 1942. Essentially, Anouilh took the issue in Sophocles' play of whether Antigone was right to defy the State and expanded it, centring his play around a conflict of principles between Antigone and Creon. At the same time, he 'updated' certain aspects of the play, working this around the inescapably ancient Greek theme, which gives an unusually fluid time setting.

The character and function of Antigone, the eponymous heroine, is very important to the impact of the play as a whole. Anouilh's Antigone has several characteristics in common with that of Sophocles - for example her considerable and very practical courage, 'clawing up the earth with her nails' to bury her brother as Anouilh has her say. A difference in the two Antigones' characters, however, is that while in the early scene with Ismene Sophocles' Antigone declares 'I will bury my brother; / And if I die for it, what happiness', Anouilh's Antigone meets her sister's 'Don't you want to go on living?' with a passionate account of her joy in life. Anouilh also increases Haemon's importance in relation to Antigone. While in Sophocles we are told they are engaged, there is no scene between these lovers: Haemon appears only once, to plead with his father Creon for Antigone's life and Antigone makes no explicit reference to him, although she mourns in general terms at dying 'never a bride, never a mother'. But in Jean Anouilh's version, the scene in which Antigone takes leave of Haemon - without his knowing what she has just done or comprehending her words - is highly emotional and shows Antigone with a deep attachment to someone. These aspects, giving Antigone a definite interest in life, make even more startling her rejection of what Creon stands for and offers her; neither her joy in life nor her love for Haemon is enough to persuade her to compromise her ideals and live.

The substance of the argument between Creon and Haemon is also altered by Anouilh: Haemon argues that Creon, being the king, can save Antigone, whom he is reluctant to kill anyway, and Creon replies that he cannot. Here the lines of Creon and Haemon are virtually exchanged:

Sophocles:

*CREON: And was not this woman's act dishonourable?*

*HAEMON: The people of Thebes think not.*

*CREON: ...Since when do I take my orders from the people of Thebes?*

*HAEMON: Isn't that rather a childish thing to say?*

Anouilh:

*CREON: The mob already knows the truth. It is howling for her blood. I can do nothing.*

*HAEMON: But, Father, you are master in Thebes.*

*CREON: I am master under the law. Not above the law.*

Anouilh has thus altered Creon's character considerably. Rather than the arrogant dictator who shocks his people by his disregard for divine law, he is a weak man who cannot go against an angry mob - he has become the victim of his own policies, because he did not want either the edict or Antigone's death, but found both expedient. Incidentally, the attitude of the Thebans - if Haemon is right - is altered; they do not complain helplessly against an evil law, but are thoroughly brainwashed and brutalised. It is a different form of tyranny.

Yet if Creon as a character is less strong and possibly more likeable in Anouilh's version, what he represents is still dictatorship. Sophocles' play has a scene between Antigone and Creon in which Creon insists that Antigone's actions 'broke the law' and that there is no reason to 'give equal honour to good and bad', while Antigone argues that Creon's order was not 'strong enough/ To overrule the...laws of...heaven, you being only a man' and that 'there is no shame in honouring my brother' - traitor to Thebes or not. The question of whether Antigone should have defied the law is considered by the Chorus, and they conclude that 'authority cannot afford to connive at disobedience', although Creon's should have 'held the gods in awe'. Creon is wrong, but the law is still the law.

It is this scene which Anouilh makes the central one of the play. Half-way through it, Creon tells Antigone the unedifying truth about her brothers, who were 'a pair of blackguards - both engaged in selling out Thebes' which she accepts; this neatly removes Polynices' burial from the equation, and the clash of ideologies, practical totalitarianism versus individual integrity and freedom, takes centre-stage.

Anouilh does not make the scene an obvious good vs. evil conflict; Creon's position appears tenable and we may at moments see him as sensible and Antigone as 'the victim of her own self-will' as Sophocles' Chorus say; even Antigone, alone, has a moment of wondering 'what I am dying for'. Evidently the occupying Nazi government were convinced by Creon, as they allowed the play. It is Creon's mention of animals as 'good, simple, tough' 'all travelling the same road ...no matter how many fall by the wayside' which reveals the flaw; Antigone will not become an animal. And if this is all the world has to offer one, it is better to die even for the smallest resistance.